

Sarah Palin, John Edwards and the Way We Choose Our Vice Presidents

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Sarah Palin's announcement that she would resign as Governor of Alaska is either the final word in a strange and frenetic episode of American political history, or it is a first step towards what promises to be, if nothing else, an unpredictable presidential campaign. Palin's speech announcing her decision made her sound like a somewhat bizarre cross between a 21st Century version of Richard Nixon after losing the California governor's race to Pat Brown in 1962, and a precocious tween excited about learning the phrase "affect positive change" for the first time and working it in at every possible, and even impossible, opportunity.

Interestingly, Palin's announcement last week is not the only case of a former vice presidential nominee behaving erratically and embarrassing themselves this year. A few months ago the story of John Edwards' affair and odd behavior of his own once again dominated the talk shows and blogosphere. It may seem unfair to compare John Edwards to Sarah Palin. However, they are both former vice presidential candidates with very little experience in government whose qualifications for high office have been brought into question due to their recent behavior and comments.

The Edwards and Palin stories both underscore the quirk in our electoral system through which vice presidents are nominated. Candidates for both parties win presidential nominations through a difficult, multi-year process during which they must appear before countless editorial boards, interest groups and community events to demonstrate their knowledge and views on key issues, participate in many debates, forums and discussions, survive the scrutiny of investigative journalists from the old and new media and, unless they are extremely wealthy, convince thousands of people to donate to their campaigns. Nobody can slip through this process easily.

Vice presidential candidates, by contrast simply have to make a good impression on their party's nominee. It seems that in some cases, notably Edwards and Palin, running mates are chosen based on very recent political developments or short term strategic needs, rather than more serious criteria. Presidential candidates regularly defend their running mates as the best person for the job and qualified to be president, but that cannot seriously have been said to be the case for Palin or Edwards. Palin was chosen both because McCain got scared that the party's base would abandon him and because he thought he could move women away from Obama after the tough primary between Obama and Clinton. Edwards was chosen after coming in second in a string of primaries and impressing many as being smart and telegenic.

The vetting process for vice presidential candidates is clearly quite different than that for the people on the top of the ticket. Vice presidential candidates must face a series of, presumably, difficult interviews from the nominee's team and provide information on their background to the candidate, but that is about it. Not only is there no way of knowing whether or not the vice

presidential nominee is being entirely forthcoming, but the vice presidential candidate does not have to face any test from voters or the media until she, or he, is already on the ticket.

Being nominated for vice president is unlike any other American political process because vice presidential nominees immediately move into the inner circle of top political leaders in their party. Many recently defeated vice presidential candidates have been the beneficiary of this, vaulting over equally or more qualified members of their own party in presidential contests. Palin would not even be a factor for 2012 had she not been McCain's running mate. Similarly John Edwards and Joseph Lieberman also became stronger presidential contenders than they should have been because of what John Kerry and Al Gore, respectively, did for them by nominating them as their running mates.

The ongoing soap operas into which the political careers of former vice presidential nominees John Edwards and Sarah Palin have descended are amusing, and occasionally disturbing, but for now they are harmless. For either of them to be a political force again they will have to go directly to the voters and win their support and confidence. This seems to be off the table for Edwards and something of a long shot, although far from an impossibility, for Palin. To some extent, their stories are the more benign side of the way we choose our vice presidents. The less benign side of this process is encapsulated in the person of Dick Cheney, who lacked the political skills, or basic human decency to get elected to high office on his own, but as vice president was arguable the most important person in the country for several years during the Bush administration.

Every few years we alter the way our presidential nominees are chosen due to the ample imperfections of the presidential nominating systems, but the way we choose our vice president's has remained largely the same for years. Palin, Edwards, and less amusingly, Cheney, are three good reasons why it would make sense to revisit this system.